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Authorities try to keep tabs on sex offenders

Those on probation, parole get checkups

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John Gastaldo

Probation Officers Sean Cole (left) and Josh Peterson headed out to pay visits to sex offenders on parole.



Photo by John Gastaldo

GPS ankle bracelets allow authorities to keep tabs on parolees.

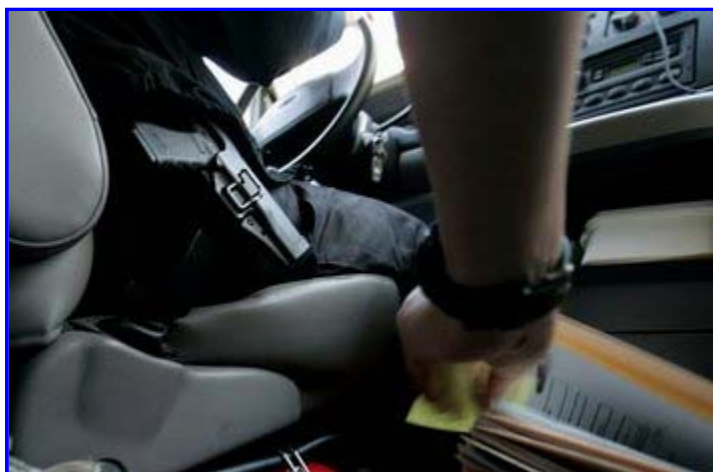


Photo by John Gastaldo

Cole was at the wheel while Peterson reached for a file. Nearly a quarter of the county's sex offenders are on probation or parole, subjecting them to stricter conditions and closer tracking.

Layers of supervision

Police/sheriff: By law required to track all sex offenders living in their jurisdictions through annual registration, for life. Officers also can conduct home visits and track down offenders who don't register or who lie about their residences.

Parole: Monitors registered sex offenders on parole. All are tracked via GPS ankle bracelets. Agents conduct two home visits per month on high-risk offenders and review GPS data daily. Lower-risk offenders are visited at home at least once per month, and their GPS data are reviewed twice per month.

Probation: Monitors registered sex offenders for the duration of their probation. Offenders get two visits per month — one at home and one in the field (i.e. coffee shop, office) — as well as take polygraphs and attend treatment.

SAFE task force: The team augments police during home visits and is able to spend more time chasing down offenders who violate registry conditions. The team aims to visit all of the county's 4,000 offenders each year. The task force is led by the state Department of Justice and includes San Diego police, Sheriff's Department, county probation, state parole, U.S. marshals and the District Attorney's Office.

TRACKING REGISTERED SEX OFFENDERS						
Sex offender units by full-time (FT) and part-time (PT) status						
Law enforcement agency	Officers		Civilian		SAFE* task force	Offenders (approx.)
	FT	PT	FT	PT		
Carlsbad		1				50
Chula Vista		3				230
Coronado		1				6
El Cajon		1		1		220
Escondido		12	1			198
La Mesa		1		2		70
National City		2		2		95
Oceanside			1			230
San Diego	5				1	1,800
Sheriff's Dept.		16	1		2	1,000
*Sexual Assault Felony Enforcement (all full-time)						
SOURCE: The agencies			CRISTINA MARTINEZ BYVIK / Union-Tribune			

The 39-year-old convicted sex offender seemed a little jumpy to the two probation officers who made a recent surprise visit to the La Jolla townhouse he shares with his mother.

The officers were there to search the man's living quarters for anything that would indicate a probation violation, such as alcohol, pornography or contact with minors. They found a small pocket knife decorated with two naked cherubs — not quite a violation.

"He was really, really nervous," senior Probation Officer Sean Cole said afterward.

"Yes, he's an odd duck, a strange guy," agreed Probation Officer Josh Peterson.

The man, who authorities said committed a sexual offense against a 16-year-old girl, has been the responsibility of the county since completing a three-month jail stay in 2007.

Probation is one type of supervision that San Diego County's 4,000 offenders get, part of a system of enforcement that includes local police and state parole agents. The system has been getting more attention since convicted sex offender John Albert Gardner III, 31, was charged on March 3 with rape and murder in the death of Chelsea King, 17, of Poway. Gardner has pleaded not guilty.

Besides registering with the city of San Diego as a sex offender, the La Jolla offender gets at least two checkups a month by probation officers, a \$250 polygraph test at least every six months and sex-offender treatment. Officers would not identify the man because he is not required to be publicly identified on the state's sex-offender Web site.

Nearly a quarter of the county's offenders — about 1,000 — are on probation or parole, subjecting them to stricter conditions and closer tracking. The level of supervision decreases substantially once offenders complete parole or probation, leaving it up to local police to enforce the requirement that they register as offenders.

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Laws requiring police to track sex offenders have been on the books since 1947, when California became the first in the nation to pass a registry law. But it wasn't until 2004 that many of those offenders' addresses were easily accessible via the Megan's Law Web site.

Police must track sex offenders' addresses, employment and vehicle information, regardless of the offenders' probation or parole status. It is the sex offenders' responsibility to update the information around their birthdays each year or as soon as a change occurs, for the rest of their lives. Sexually violent predators — or those diagnosed with mental disorders — must do so every 90 days, and those who are transients must

provide updates every 30 days.

The sex offenders must go to the law enforcement station in their city, fill out paperwork and show proof of residency, such as a utility bill. Authorities are required to pass that information to the state Department of Justice to keep the database and Megan's Law Web site up to date.

But the police responsibility under the law ends there.

While the law does not require police to visit offenders at home, many agencies try to check up on offenders at least once a year to verify residency. Authorities put the registration compliance rate in San Diego County somewhere between 96 percent and 98 percent.

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Most cities do not dedicate full-time resources to tracking sex offenders. Instead, agencies spread the duties among several detectives and officers, who juggle the work along with regular caseloads.

Some departments have it fairly easy, such as the small community of Coronado. A detective has the collateral duty of managing the city's six sex offenders, including one who has been in a coma for several years.

In Escondido, 12 officers, detectives and supervisors are trained to regularly deal with the city's nearly 200 sex offenders, and a civilian works full time managing the files and paperwork.

Many of the offenders are cooperative during the checks, said Escondido police Lt. Bob Benton, allowing officers to search their homes and ask them about what they've been up to, even though the offenders don't have to oblige.

Escondido police have said that they made contact with Gardner at least eight times since January 2008 as part of his offender status in the city. They declined to give further details about the nature of the contacts, citing a gag order in the case.

The proposal of annual home checks is more daunting in San Diego, where even with a full-time unit, the resources don't exist to visit all 1,800 offenders living there.

With a team of six — a sergeant, three detectives and two officers — that translates to one officer for every 300 sex offenders. They pay special attention to the offenders they've deemed to be potential problems, said San Diego police Lt. Rick O'Hanlon.

"There are individuals who are always on our radar," O'Hanlon said. "Based on their criminal history, we want to keep a close eye on them. And then we have some offenders who've registered for 20 years, every year, and haven't been a problem whatsoever. That's the bulk of them."

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The next level of enforcement is the Sexual Assault Felony Enforcement task force.

The team of about 10 officers from various agencies aims to independently check on all 4,000 offenders in the county each year and aids police departments where it can.

"Anything they can't handle, we take over and go above and beyond what they do," said task force commander David Collazo, a special agent supervisor with the California Department of Justice.

For instance, on a recent Saturday, the team partnered with San Diego police to knock on the doors of 118 registered sex offenders to verify their addresses. About 90 percent of the people were home, and most were living where they said they were, Collazo said.

“We can always use more resources, and we can always use more people and more funding to visit these guys after hours,” Collazo said. “But we do have a good handle on it. We’re out there every day tracking these guys, making sure they’re compliant.”

However, the state Sex Offender Management Board is voicing concern about a lack of adequate funding for regional SAFE task forces to provide in-depth monitoring of every offender. The task force in San Diego is funded by participating agencies as well as a federal grant that is due to run out this year.

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Besides being required to register their addresses with the police in their city, registered sex offenders on parole or probation also sign a waiver that allows authorities to search their living quarters at any time during the duration of their supervision.

In addition, the nearly 500 sex offenders on parole are tracked by GPS, making them the most-watched in the county. Even so, parole agents have been ordered to step up enforcement in the wake of Gardner’s arrest.

New directives put into effect a few weeks ago require two home visits per month for high-risk sex offenders, up from one per month, and at least one per month for low-risk offenders.

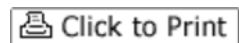
Similar attention is paid to the 484 offenders on probation, who began to be monitored last week by a specialized unit — a move that has been in the works since last year and is not tied to Gardner’s arrest, said Mack Jenkins, the county’s chief probation officer.

Probation officers also receive reports from sex-offender treatment providers each quarter, or sooner if issues come up. The offenders sign waivers allowing details of their therapy to be disclosed to officers.

“What we are hoping to achieve is to hold these people accountable and prevent them from reoffending,” Jenkins said.

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<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2010/apr/11/authorities-try-keep-tabs-sex-offenders>



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